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ABSTRACT

Problems associated with budget, distance, and time often make rural inservice teacher education difficult and impractical. This paper outlines problems encountered by novice online-learners and describes several techniques that helped rural teachers participate and succeed in a Web-based inservice teacher education program. The Peer Coaching Rural In-Service Model (PRISM) is testing a model for providing online support and continuing education in classroom management to teachers in rural areas. The project designed and delivered specific learning support mechanisms to provide effective instruction. Some of the supports were integrated components of the course platform and other interventions had little or nothing to do with technology. Specifically, the inservice support mechanisms included: (1) face-to-face learner-instructor contact; (2) use of an asynchronous delivery model that allowed for independent, non-simultaneous access to the course platform; (3) encouragement of personal support contacts; (4) the offer of reduced tuition to encourage teacher participation; (5) the encouragement of the use of Web-based communications with low-risk initial assignments; (6) the use of individual-specific, assignment-specific, online comments from instructors critiquing each participant's work; (6) the creation of a welcoming home page; and (7) the use of lay terminology. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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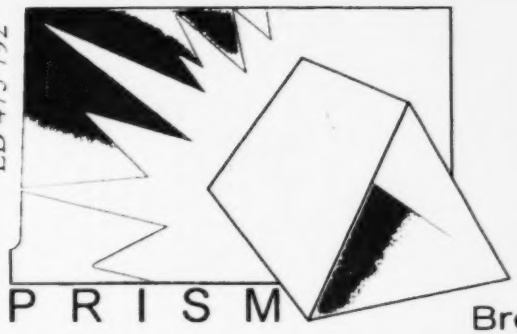

PRISM Project Technical Report #1

P R I S M

SUPPORTING TEACHERS DURING ONLINE IN-SERVICE INSTRUCTION

Brent A. Askvig and Kari Arrayan · June 2002

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ABSTRACT

Problems associated with budget, distance, and time often make rural in-service teacher education difficult and impractical. Although recent advances in web-based course delivery allow teachers from virtually anywhere in the world access to quality instruction, some teachers have found it difficult to use online instruction. This paper outlines problems encountered by novice online-learners, and describes several techniques that helped rural teachers participate and succeed in a web-based in-service teacher education program.

WEB-BASED LEARNING

Job-related responsibilities and child care issues often make it difficult for many classroom teachers to attend traditional on-campus university classes. These problems are exacerbated when teachers have disabilities or live in remote rural communities. Place-bound and time-bound teachers who wish to participate in university-sponsored in-service programs may find that the flexibility offered by online technology makes it their only realistic option (Brown, 2000; Rintala, 1998, as cited by Mielke, 1999). In addition to its practical benefits, distance learning allows rural in-service trainees to access national experts and to link with peers who bring varied social, cultural, economic, and teaching experience to the in-service experience (Willis, 1992). Online instruction allows various formats for information delivery and participant feedback.

Web-based learning has characteristics that make it a particularly effective tool for providing in-service training to teachers working in remote rural communities. Since small rural schools employ few teachers, it would be unreasonable to think that they can afford to pay the travel expenses, instructor fees, facility costs, materials, and other expenses associated with an intense, sustained in-service training program. Issues related to distance and time also make the cost of sending rural teachers to distant in-service workshops prohibitive. In addition to travel expenses, rural schools would have to consider the cost of time lost when employees are participating in distant training activities. The significant reduction in time-based cost and travel related expenses associated with web-based training makes the delivery of effective in-service training to rural teachers an attractive training option.

Online instruction is still new to many rural educators and they may approach web-based training with curiosity, awe, fear and uncertainty. Online instructors at the N.D. Center for Persons with Disabilities (NDCPD) have used several social and emotional support mechanisms to help online trainees overcome their initial misgivings, use web-based technology to gain knowledge, and apply their new knowledge in their classrooms. This paper discusses issues faced in delivering online in-service instruction to rural teachers, and the lessons learned by NDCPD staff supporting online in-service participants.

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PRISM

NDCPD, a University Center of Excellence at Minot State University in Minot, ND, is implementing a research project called PRISM (Peer Coaching Rural In-Service Model). PRISM tests an in-service model for providing online support and continuing education in classroom management to teachers in rural areas. PRISM currently has participants in North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana's remote rural communities.

We found that taking purposeful steps to address the comfort level of teachers, especially early on, helped them to stop worrying about the technology and focus on the content of the course and application of the information in their classrooms. Early intervention has both technology-focused activities (e.g., development of a solid WebCT platform) and steps to ensure that participants have adequate emotional support.

IN-SERVICE LEARNER SUPPORTS

In order to provide effective instruction, we designed and delivered an asynchronous online course platform and specific learner support mechanisms. These supports ranged from personal contacts and low risk assignments to use of understandable terminology and reduced tuition agreements. Some of the supports were integrated components of the course platform and other interventions had little or nothing to do with technology. Figure one lists PRISM support mechanisms.

Figure One – In-Service Supports

Face-to-face contact
Asynchronous delivery
Personal contact
Reduced cost
Low-risk initial assignments
Personalized instructor responses
Inviting course homepage
Low-tech terminology

MAKE FACE-TO-FACE LEARNER-INSTRUCTOR CONTACT

Most teachers enrolled in PRISM's online courses were distance learning novices. Prior to enrollment, they needed assurance that the software platform used for the course was easy to use. Before beginning an online in-service course, staff visited participating rural school sites and demonstrated course-related technology. This had a positive influence on the comfort level of the teachers. Face-to-face visits established a personal relationship between PRISM staff and participants that had a significant positive impact throughout the in-service experience. Teachers were more inclined to commit to the training since staff had committed to a personal visit in their schools.

USE AN ASYNCHRONOUS DELIVERY MODEL

There are two ways to schedule online instruction. The main distinction between the two is whether teachers and learners are participating at the same time or not (Parrott, 1995). Synchronous models have scheduled instructional times when all students and the instructor access the course platform. PRISM's asynchronous instructional delivery allows for independent, non-simultaneous access to the course platform. The asynchronous format had the advantage of removing scheduling barriers for rural teachers. Our experience is consistent with the findings of Black (1998) who reported that an asynchronous model was more likely to meet the needs of adult learners who had limited study time.

An asynchronous format has also been found to encourage community-building (Brown, 2001; Rossman, 1999). Edelson (1998) reported that student interactions in the asynchronous model appeared to be more forthcoming and thoughtful than the responses of students engaged in synchronous instruction. Soo and Bonk (1998) found that students who participated in asynchronous online experiences actually valued learner-learner interaction and teacher-learner interactions more than learner-material interactions. Yang and Newby (2001) also found that creating a sense of community by establishing a social contact and promoting student-instructor and learner-teacher interactions is one of the most important issues of teaching online. PRISM's experience with asynchronous learning was consistent with these findings.

Although PRISM courses had calendars and instructors encouraged students to complete their work within a range of dates, PRISM's asynchronous learners didn't worry about being online at the same time as their classmates and they were not concerned about "keeping up" with the class. Asynchronous online classes provided instructors considerable flexibility regarding granting extensions on assignment due dates or for course completion. This flexibility does not obviate the need for setting deadlines but it does take some of the pressure off students and reduced their fear of the technology. If a technical difficulty did arise, it was easy for the instructor to grant an extension.

ENCOURAGE PERSONAL SUPPORT CONTACTS

Over the course of the in-service program, participants developed a close ongoing relationship with their instructors and called them for help with program content, instructional intervention, and technical support. Although participants could access a number of online supports and competent technical staff, they preferred to use the project's toll free number to call their instructors when they had a

problem. Comfortable instructor-participant relationships were particularly important to participants who were uneasy around computers. They preferred to get technical help from familiar instructors rather than contact PRISM's technical staff. When it came to technological problems, participants found the reassurance and comfort they received from familiar instructors to be more important than the quality of the technical information they obtained. It is difficult to overstate the importance of a familiar voice.

KEEP THE COST AS LOW AS POSSIBLE

The PRISM project's graduate level courses were offered at reduced cost ($40.00). This deeply discounted graduate tuition encouraged teacher participation by establishing a "not much to lose" attitude that appealed to first-time online learners. It made learning to use the new technology palatable and helped students positively endure the bugs and technical lapses that are often encountered by customers of small rural Internet service providers.

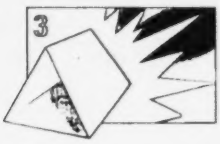
ENCOURAGE THE USE OF WEB-BASED COMMUNICATIONS WITH LOW-RISK INITIAL ASSIGNMENTS

One particularly useful technique was the use of an easy initial assignment. For their first assignment students in PRISM's Peer Coaching course went to the online course bulletin board and posted answers to questions that were based on an article the instructor had placed on "electronic reserve." Students were also asked to comment on past experience with peer coaching. This assignment required very little "homework" and students learned to access the "electronic reserve," post comments on a bulletin board, and responded to their classmates' postings.

In some of the PRISM course sections all the participants taught in the same rural school. Since they already knew each other and were in close proximity, PRISM staff found it necessary to emphasize the need to use course-based communications tools. One teacher-participant commented:

> ***"From what I can discern there are just four of us taking the class and I am actually typing to people who I could run down the hall to talk to. Is that correct? I type seven words a minute with errors, but I run fast!"***

This teacher wanted to stay within her comfort zone by communicating face-to-face with the participants in her school. With encouragement, she began to use and became comfortable with PRISM's online communications systems. Participants needed to be reminded that they had to learn course materials and use the system's online tools, gaining experience from exposure to thoughts, insights, and comments of their fellow students. The literature and our experience suggest that certain learners, who may be



apprehensive about speaking out in class; feel "safe" in the anonymity of an online environment. In online environments these learners often generate thoughtful work and make straightforward comments that probably would not occur in a face-to-face meeting.

INSTRUCTORS SHOULD RETURN A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO LEARNER-POSED ASSIGNMENTS

The bond between instructor and teacher-participant was strengthened when instructors wrote individual-specific, assignment-specific, online comments critiquing each participant's work. Participants reported that they believed their instructor paid attention to, and cared about their learning. Participants reported that even brief responses that acknowledged the receipt of an assignment put them at ease. Although responding to every assignment or message posted by a participant can be cumbersome, our data suggest that students perceived instructor responses to be an absolutely essential part of PRISM's success.

CREATE A WELCOMING HOME PAGE

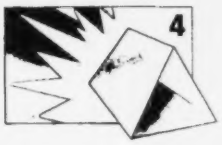
Course home pages were often the first thing seen by PRISM participants. PRISM participants reported that the home page set the tone for the entire class and helped students to become comfortable in an online learning environment. Learners enrolled in PRISM's courses found a large "welcome" that included the name of the course and the name of the learner's school. Learners who "found" their course's home page knew that they were in the right place. PRISM's instructors used course home pages to post regular announcements, provide assignment reminders, and point out course-related web sites. An icon on the homepage also linked learners to an online lesson designed to prepare students for online instruction.

USE LAY TERMINOLOGY

We did not assume that online novices would understand the terminology of online instruction. Terms such as thread, breadcrumb trail, and browser confused some PRISM participants and added to feelings of frustration and incompetence. On the other hand some participants addressed their awkwardness with a sense of humor. One teacher stated:

> ***"I have no idea what threads are and how they all get connected like they are supposed to and how do you answer the questions where you are supposed to. I use thread to cross stitch and sew."***

All PRISM staff, particularly those assisting with technical problems, were aware of the need to use layman's terminology when exchanging information.



SUMMARY

These relatively low-cost actions allowed us to adequately support online in-service learners. The implementation of the learner-support techniques described above was associated with a reduction in PRISM's dropout rate which was 23% in the project's first year and 3% in the second year. Even though less than 10% of PRISM's year 2 learners had experience in online instruction, every participant reported that they felt comfortable and welcomed in their online class.

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